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Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly

Standing Committee on Social Programs

Report on the Review of the
2002-2003 Main Estimates

Chair: Mr. Brendan Bell

Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly
Standing Committee on Social Programs

FEB 21 2002

THE HONOURABLE ANTHONY (TONY) WHITFORD, MLA
SPEAKER OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Mr. Speaker:

Your Standing Committee on Social Programs has the honour of presenting its Report on the Review of the 2002-2003 Main Estimates, and commends it to the House.

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Standing Committee on Social Programs
Report on the Review of the 2002/2003 Main Estimates

Introduction

The Standing Committee on Social Programs met from January 14 to January 25, 2002 to review the Draft Main Estimates. The Social Programs envelope includes the Department of Education, Culture and Employment, the Department of Justice, the Department of Health and Social Services and the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation. The Committee in our discussions with the Ministers raised a number of issues. These discussions resulted in the Committee making some specific recommendations. The issues and recommendations will be discussed under the appropriate Department.

Department of Education, Culture and Employment

Introduction

The Standing Committee on Social Programs met on January 15th, 2002 to consider the 2002/2003 Main Estimates for the Department of Education, Culture and Employment.

Committee Members noted a $694,000 increase in the Amortisation Estimates, $2,834,000 for the collective agreement with the Northwest Territories Teachers Association, $1,000,000 in additional funding for day-care and $1,500,000 to improve Income Support Programs as changes since the Business Plan Review.

Members were pleased to note that the Department accepted the recommendation, made by the AOC during the review of the Business Plan, that the Department reinvest the projected $1.5 million saving that were expected in the Income Support Program. Members were also pleased to see that the Department recognised the Social Programs Committee's concerns, expressed during the Business Plan Review, and increased funding for day-care programs by $1,000,000 over last year's Main Estimates.

Income Support Programs

As previously mentioned, Members were pleased to note that the Department accepted the recommendation of the Accountability and Oversight Committee that the $1,500,000 in projected savings, due to increased economic activity, be reinvested in the program.

The $1,500,000 will be invested in improving the Senior's Fuel Subsidy by decreasing the income threshold for eligibility, increasing the singles accommodation benefit, increasing the disability allowance, increasing the food benefit and by allowing Income Support recipients to keep their GST rebate cheques with no penalty.

Members are concerned that, even though the Department is increasing the dollar amounts provided to Income Support clients for food and personal items, the increase does not contemplate the provision of a healthy food basket. Without adequate resources to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables, Income Support clients, and especially their dependants, may not be getting the nutrition they need to be successful in achieving their goals.

The Department maintains that because there is no recognised standard for what constitutes as healthy food basket it is impossible for the Department to place a dollar value on the basket. Committee Members would point out that the Canada Food Guide provides direction for what constitutes healthy eating. It should be a straightforward matter to extrapolate this information into a dollar value for the provision of a healthy food basket in each community. The Standing Committee on Social Programs will continue to press the Department to provide enough funding to Income Support Clients to purchase a healthy food basket.

Improvements to the Senior's Fuel Subsidy have broadened the income thresholds for eligibility and will result in more seniors being helped in maintaining their independence. Members have requested further information from the Department on the possibility of the changes to the Senior's Fuel Subsidy being made retroactive to the start of the 2001/2002 heating season.

In addition, Members have asked the Department to clarify policy as it relates to the provision of firewood under the Senior's Fuel Subsidy. Committee Members have been told some seniors have received their five cords of wood in eight foot lengths and have then had to pay someone out of their own pockets to cut the wood into stove-length. Members believe in consistency and consequently, the wood should be provided to the seniors in stove-lengths.

Expansion of Kindergarten Program

The Standing Committee on Social Programs has asked the Department of Education, Culture and Employment to examine the possibility of expanding Kindergarten to full-time for 5 year old students and half time for 4 year old students. Committee Members see an advantage to expanding the kindergarten program in terms of early childhood development and in terms of reducing strains on the day-care system.

The Aboriginal Head Start program is an example of the advantages of Early Childhood Education. The majority of students who have gone through the program are entering grade one functioning at least at a grade one level, if not better.

The Department has provided the Committee with a rough estimate of $8,000,000 to implement a half-time kindergarten program for four-year-olds and a full-time kindergarten program for five-year-olds. This estimate does not include any provision for capital costs for expanding schools.

It is obvious that a decision to expand the kindergarten program could not be made and incorporated in time to be included in this year's budget. However, the Standing Committee on Social Programmes strongly believes that the issue of expanding the kindergarten program deserves further in-depth study. The Department of Education, Culture and Employment has provided Committee with a rough estimate on the costs to expand the kindergarten program – they did not provide any analysis on any projected cost-savings that could be realised.

For example, Committee Members can point to studies that show that a $1.00 investment in quality early childhood education means a $2.00 return to Canadian society as whole in the future. Students who receive a good foundation for learning through a quality early childhood education are significantly more likely to graduate from high school and University. Human Resources and Development Canada have proved a direct correlation between education levels and reliance on income support programs. The higher a level of education - the less likely a person is to collect Unemployment or social assistance. Members would also point out that there would be reduced costs to the department's day-care programme.

The Standing Committee on Social Programmes will be pressing the Department of Education, Culture and Employment to examine the positive effects of expanding the NWT's kindergarten programme.

Student Financial Assistance Program

The Standing Committee on Social Programs has requested further information on the Department's new Interest Relief Plan. While Members can see the benefit of an Interest Relief Plan for students who do not have the financial wherewithal to pay back their loans as determined by a means test, there is a concern that the Interest Relief Plan is too narrow in its scope resulting in very little uptake.

Members of the Committee believe that if the real intent of the Maximising Northern Employment strategy is to encourage students to return to the North and use their skills in developing our economy, other government programs, such as the Student Financial Assistance Program, should complement that intent.

Under the present system, there is no incentive for a student with a significant student loan, beyond what is remissible, to return to the north. The student can find employment elsewhere and make the same payments on the loan as if they were domiciled in the Northwest Territories. If the government was to consider making the interest on student loans remissible, it might encourage students to return to the north. The student would still be expected to repay the principal of the loan, but would have the interest remissed if they lived in the Northwest Territories. Another possibility would be making student loan interest an exemption under the territorial income tax regime.

The Committee was disappointed that the Department had not yet dealt with the issue of how Distance Education programs would be dealt with under the Student Loan program. Members do look forward to reviewing the details of how the Department will deal with Distance Education under the Student Financial Assistance Program in June of 2002.

Day-care Programs

Members were pleased that the Minister managed to secure an extra $1,000,000 in funding for day-care programs. Members understand that the extra funding will be used to increase the daily subsidy to licensed day-care operators and to increase the subsidy to low-income parents.

While both of these funding increases will in no doubt reduce some of the strains on the day-care system, there is still a concern at the Committee level that there is more the Department could be doing to help day-care operators.

Members note that non-profit associations run many of the licensed day-care providers and are reliant on volunteer board members. Many of these associations have experienced difficulties in attracting board members with the right skill sets to efficiently run a successful non-profit venture.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs believes one area the Department should concentrate on is providing administrative support to day-care operators/volunteer organisations. As an example, day-care in the Dogrib region is administered through the Dogrib Community Services Board. This has meant significant savings through a centralised administration process and has resulted in quality day-care in the region.

It was noted that the Minister spoke of working with the City of Yellowknife to streamline day-care operations within Yellowknife. Committee Members look forward to further information on any success.

The City of Yellowknife and the larger regional centres may have the capacity within the local government to become involved in the administration/support of local day-care operations. However, it is clear to Members that the smaller communities would still need support from the Department.

Recommendation

> ***The Standing Committee on Social Programs recommends that the Department of Education, Culture and Employment assist Local Day-care Operators in dealing with their administrative burden and by offering quality support and advice to volunteer boards.***

Aboriginal Language Strategy

During the review of the Main Estimates, the Department provided the Standing Committee on Social Programs a briefing on the Aboriginal Language Strategy. Many of the concepts, such as Language Nests, have been successful in other parts of the world where language and its associated culture has been in danger of being assimilated by a dominant culture.

Members of the Committee note that the implementation of many of the facets of the Aboriginal Language Strategy will require buy in from the local education authorities. Members are concerned the strategy assumes large volunteer participation by fluent members of a language group and that this may be a significant challenge in this day and age.

The strategy contains no money to provide remuneration to those people who get involved in the language nests. Committee wonders if there has been any interest expressed by persons eager to volunteer for this concept.

Members note that the Maori Language Nests that the Department is holding up as the example of the success of such programs are staffed by paid members of the New Zealand Public Service called Kahanga Reo Kaiako.

The Standing Committee notes that many parts of the strategy are in the development phase and believes that the Department has a lot of work to do before it can implement its Aboriginal Language Strategy.

On a related subject, Members remain concerned that the development of standards and certification for aboriginal translators and interpreters appears stalled. Committee Members strongly believe that the lack of certification is impacting the ability of aboriginal northerners to earn a living providing interpreter/translation services. Employers may be reluctant to pay aboriginal interpreter/translators the same as certified French interpreter/translators because of concerns about professional standards.

Towards Excellence

Members noted that the last Report on Education in the Northwest Territories: Towards Excellence was released in February 2000 for the school year 1998/1999. Members are disappointed that the Department has not kept up with the original promise to release this report every second year and strongly encourage the Department to keep the report current. Committee Members look forward to seeing the next Report by June 1st, 2002 as promised by the Minister.

Members would also like to see Student Debt Load for Post-secondary Students included as one of the indicators included in Towards Excellence: A Report on Education in the Northwest Territories. Members are concerned the redesign of the Student Financial Assistance Program may adversely affect northerners by putting an onerous debt load on returning students.

Recommendation

> ***The Standing Committee on Social Programs recommends that the Department of Education, Culture and Employment track student debt load as one of the indicators in Towards Excellence: A Report on Education in the Northwest Territories.***

Adult Basic Education

Members noted that basic literacy programs are available in most communities. However, for students to advance past the basic literacy stage it is necessary for them to take accredited high school courses. It is understood that some of these high school courses are available on-line and can be accessed by students in the learning centres and after hours in the schools. Members believe that there must also be a resource person available to these students to provide tutoring assistance and technical support. Simple access to the necessary computer hardware and software will not ensure success.

Pupil/Teacher Ratio versus Student Support Services

The Standing Committee on Social Programs is extremely pleased that the Department increased funding to decrease the Pupil/Teacher Ratio in advance of the legislated requirement. This has meant that more money will be made available to the School boards for the provision of instructional services in these Main Estimates. However, Members note that increased funding for the Pupil/Teacher Ratio does not always relate directly to the actual number of students in a classroom. This is because the funding for Pupil/Teacher Ratios can be used by the Education Authorities to fund positions like language and cultural specialists, guidance counsellors, vice-principals and shop and Phys-Ed teachers, or even to provide bussing.

So, even with the increase in funding to decrease the Pupil/Teacher Ratio, it is possible that in some schools no increase in support will reach the students and teachers in the classroom. The requirement to increase support to teachers and students in the classroom was made very clear in the 2000 Student Support Needs Assessment.

Instead of putting all of the additional funding into the reduction of the Pupil/Teacher Ratio, Members of the Standing Committee proposed that the estimated $900,000 that would be necessary to meet next year's legislated requirement for student support funding be advanced to this year's Main Estimates. The Department can then use the remaining additional funding to reduce the Pupil/Teacher Ratio in this fiscal year – and then meet the legislated requirement next year by using the $900,000 that would have been used to meet the Student Support requirements.

Members passed this proposal on to the Accountability and Oversight Committee in order that a recommendation could be made to the Government to change the Main Estimates in advance of their presentation to the Legislative Assembly. We are very pleased that the Minister and the Government accepted this recommendation.

Private Sector Development Fund

Members noted that this part of the Maximising Northern Employment Strategy was very poorly advertised. This is the section of the Strategy that provides funding support to private business so they can hire student interns.

Members received complaints from constituent business owners that they were unaware that the program was available and were not afforded an opportunity to apply for funding.

The Standing Committee recognises the Department was rushed in rolling out and setting up the parameters for funding eligibility and does not believe that there were any improprieties in funding allocation.

The Minister has committed to improving communication of the Private Sector Development Fund to the business community and ensuring a fair and equitable approval process. Members of the Committee were satisfied with this commitment until it was noted that the government had taken out a four page ad – at the fold – advertising the Maximising Northern Employment Strategy and highlighting the Private Sector Development Fund in the January edition of the Far North Oil and Gas Review.

An examination of similar publications, published at the same time, and aimed at the Mining and Construction Sectors revealed no such advertising. Members of the Committee are now concerned that the Government is only targeting the Oil and Gas Sector for funding under the Private Sector Development Fund.

Nursing Program at Aurora College

Members of the Standing Committee remain convinced that the expansion of the Nursing Program at Aurora College is one of the Northwest Territories best options for ensuring a high-quality, adequately staffed healthcare system.

It is understood that the further expansion of the program is hindered by the lack of mentors and training opportunities available at the Stanton Regional Hospital.

That being said, there has been no evidence presented to the Committee that the Department of Education, Culture and Employment, the Department of Health and Social Services, Aurora College and Stanton Regional Hospital have been working together to find ways to maximise opportunities to enrol more nurses into the Nursing Program.

Apprenticeship Training

The Standing Committee on Social Programs notes that funding for Apprenticeship Training has remained the same as contained in last year's Main Estimates.

Members are extremely concerned with all of the resource development projects expected in the next few years; there may not be enough funding available for all interested northerners to take advantage of apprenticeship opportunities.
The Minister did reassure the Members that no NWT resident, who qualified for an apprenticeship, has been turned down yet. Members believe there is a need

for the Department to closely monitor and work with the resource developers to identify and fund apprenticeship positions.

Members note that we need a variety of different paths for young people to achieve their education, and with the tremendous potential for jobs in the trades, there needs to be more emphasis on programmes like the Schools North Apprenticeship Programme (SNAP). The Committee has been a strong supporter of SNAP and Members are disappointed that there has not been a significant expansion in the numbers of students participating in the programme. The Committee expects the Department to make increased uptake a priority in the next fiscal year.

Literacy Funding to Organizations

Information provided to the Committee during the Main Estimates indicated that the majority of funding in the Literacy Strategy listed under Literacy Funding for Organisations actually was used to fund literacy activities in other Departments. The Committee does not argue with the need for funding the Department of Justice for literacy programs in the Correctional Centres. However, there was consensus that listing such funding under "Literacy Funding to Organisations" was a misnomer and that the Main Estimates should be changed to reflect that it involves transfers to other Departments.

Northwest Territories Housing Corporation

Introduction

The Standing Committee on Social Programs met on January 17th, 2002 to consider the Main Estimates for the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation. Committee Members noted a $1,250,000 increase in Operations Expense to offset forced growth to the Local Housing Authorities for increases in the price of heating fuel over numbers presented in the Business Plan. Members also noted a $1,061,000 increase related to the Government of the Northwest Territories capital contribution to the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation.

Caucus Priorities and the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation

Members of the Standing Committee on Social Programs are extremely disappointed that the priority on housing articulated at the Caucus Retreat in Hay River in December of 2001 is not reflected in these Main Estimates.

When questioned by a Member of the Committee on why the Caucus priority was not reflected in the Main Estimates the Minister stated that the Housing Corporation was confident they were meeting all of the housing demands across the Territories, with the exception of Yellowknife.

The President of the NWT Housing Corporation (NWTHC) stated the organization is working to capacity and that for any more housing construction or programs to be delivered it would be necessary to hire more staff. He also pointed out that some housing construction would not be reflected in the Corporation's Infrastructure Acquisition Plan because the only role that the Housing Corporation would have in the construction would be in either providing loan guarantees or in matching private developers with community or aboriginal development organizations.

In our subsequent discussions, the Member from the North Slave noted that one contributing factor to Yellowknife's housing crisis was that a number of his former constituents had moved to Yellowknife. These residents are gainfully employed, primarily in the Diamond Mines, and moved to Yellowknife because there were no housing options available in their home communities. The Member stated that the majority of these families would move back to their home communities, provided there was adequate, available housing.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs took their concerns with the lack of Caucus priorities being reflected in the Main Estimates of the NWT Housing Corporation to the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight.

A recommendation that Caucus priorities related to housing be reflected in the Main Estimates of the NWT Housing Corporation was forwarded to the Minister of Finance.

Co-operation between NWTHC and Municipal and Community Affairs

Members of the Standing Committee could find no evidence of co-operation on the development of lots between the Department of Municipal and Community Affair (MACA) and the NWTHC reflected in the Main Estimates.

The President of the NWTHC stated that there have been two preliminary discussions with the Department of Municipal and Community Affairs on the lot development initiative for non-tax based communities. Members of the Committee are concerned that the level of co-operation is not at a point to be of benefit in the 2002/2003 building season.

There is no point in developing lots, if the primary source of funding for construction has no available funding for construction or lending in that community.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs strongly encourages the NWT Housing Corporation to finalise plans with the Department of Municipal and Community Affairs to ensure that sufficient lots are available in the communities that the Corporation will be active in, in the upcoming year.

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and Private Developers

During the discussions on the Main Estimates for the NWT Housing Corporation reference was made to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) being reluctant to finance projects in the Northwest Territories because of its reliance on a resource based economy.

The Minister and his staff did state that there has been some policy shifts that have made it easier for developers to be financed or guaranteed through CMHC programs. The Standing Committee on Social Programs would encourage the NWTHC to work with private developers, interested in investing in the north, to access any and all relevant CMHC programs.

Lot Development in the City of Yellowknife

As stated by the Minister and in recent media reports, the biggest impediment to developers is the lack of affordable, serviced lots to build on. A developer, because they have to pay such a high price for a lot, may be unable to make a realistic profit when they sell their product to the eventual homeowner. This of course discourages the developers from even undertaking projects.

The Committee was pleased to hear of ongoing discussions between the City of Yellowknife, the NWT Housing Corporation and private developers on ways to reduce the costs of lots in Yellowknife. It is hoped that some agreement could be reached between the parties that would result in the construction of needed private and rental accommodations.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs would appreciate being kept apprised of the status and success of ongoing negotiations between the developers, the NWTHC and the City of Yellowknife.

Business Development and the Alaska Market

The Standing Committee on Social Programs is disappointed that the NWTHC has neglected the business development side of its mandate. The Minister stated in a response to a question from a Member of the Committee that there is so much demand domestically we haven't been able to go into Alaska this year to market our own products.

Members are aware of one NWT entrepreneur, specialising in the manufacture of panellised building product who could have benefited immensely from the NWTHC aggressively marketing his products in Alaska. This is evident from a recent article in the Edmonton Journal expounding the success of an Edmonton manufacturer of panellised building products in selling to the Alaskan market. Those persons in Alaska who decide to build with the panellised products are even eligible for lower mortgage rates from the Alaska Housing Corporation because of the panellised products superior insulation qualities and attendant savings.

Committee Members could determine no reason why the NWT manufacturer couldn't be marketed by the NWTHC. Given the developing barge shipping system via the Mackenzie River and the North Slope of Alaska the NWT Manufacturer may be competitive with the Edmonton supplier.

Recommendation

The Standing Committee on Social Programs recommends that if the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation is not going to comply with their mandate to market Northwest Territories products and services that this responsibility be transferred to the Department of Resources, Wildlife and Economic Development

Energy Efficiency in Public Housing

The Standing Committee on Social Programs was generally pleased with the efforts of the NWT Housing Corporation to ensure that Public Housing Units are as energy efficient as possible.

Members of the Committee look forward to being kept apprised of the status of the study being conducted by the Arctic Energy Alliance to help the Local Housing Authorities realize energy savings.

Should the study show that savings could be realised by the replacement of energy inefficient appliances and furnaces, Members would expect to see a capital replacement plan developed.

NWTHC Housing Programs Delivered by Local Housing Authorities

The Committee has always supported the devolution of decision-making to the local level for the delivery of Housing Programs. However, because of the potential for abuse, Committee Members believe that this devolution of this decision-making process to the community level does not absolve the NWT Housing Corporation of a responsibility to ensure access and program delivery fairness.

The recent court case involving fraud and theft from a Local Housing Authority has highlighted the need for due diligence and oversight of the activities of Local Housing Authorities and raised concerns that this may not be an isolated issue.

Members of the Committee would like to see a regular review process of the housing programs delivered by Local Housing Authorities conducted by the NWT Housing Corporation to ensure access and program delivery fairness.

Recommendation

The Standing Committee on Social Programs recommends that the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation conduct regular reviews and operational audits of the Local Housing Authorities that deliver Housing Programs on behalf of the Corporation to ensure access and program delivery fairness.

Further Information Required by Standing Committee

In discussions with the Minister and his officials Members were interested to hear that in addition to the Rent-Supplement Leases administered by the Corporation there were many more that were administered by the Local Housing Authority. Members of the Committee are concerned that because of these flow-through funding arrangements, the Committee has no sense of the amount of money and the number of housing units that are truly under the Rent-Supplement Program.

Members are also concerned about how loan guarantees are being made by the Housing Corporation. The Committee has not been provided with a listing of the loan guarantees that have been provided by the Housing Corporation to private developers and Aboriginal Development Corporations.

Recommendation

The Standing Committee on Social Programs recommends that the NWT Housing Corporation provide the Committee with biannual statistics on the number and costs of all Rent Supplement Units in the Northwest Territories and a listing of all loan guarantees and amounts made to developers by the NWT Housing Corporation.

Department of Justice

Introduction

The Standing Committee on Social Programs met with the Minister and his officials on January 18th, 2002 to discuss the Main Estimates for the Department of Justice.

Members noted a $2,500,000 increase under the Capital Acquisition Plan related to higher costs associated with the construction of the Young Offender and Adult Facility in Yellowknife. The Committee was told higher costs for labour, geo-technical services and materials all contributed to the $2,500,000 increase.

Under Operations Expense, Committee Members noted a $62,000 increase for forced growth related to higher heating costs for correctional centres and a $66,000 reduction in amortization costs when compared to the numbers presented during the review of the Business Plans.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs would like to complement the Department of Justice on how their Main Estimates were presented to the Committee. Members found it easy to examine each Activity and were able to readily determine the breakdown on Other Expenses. This was not always the case in other Departments under the purview of the Committee.

Policing in the Northwest Territories

The Standing Committee on Social Programs has noted in their Review of the 2002/2005 Business Plan that the Department of Justice and the RCMP have done an admirable job in holding the line on costs and in delivering a basic level of policing services.

During the review of the Business Plans Committee Members pointed out to the Department that the number of issues and trends affecting the delivery of policing in the Northwest Territories has outstripped the internal ability of the system to adapt without an increase in core funding. Committee Members point out that the many of the issues and trends affecting policing in the Northwest Territories are of concern to small and large communities.

It is time to revisit the issue of single-Member RCMP Detachments. The RCMP, rightly concerned about officer safety, is questioning the viability of the single-Member Detachment.

The Standing Committee supports the elimination of the single-Member Detachment and their replacement by a two-Member Detachment.
Members of the Committee are also concerned that increased responsibilities for policing in Wood Buffalo National Park, for doing Highway Patrols and the increase in inappropriate behaviour associated with the economic boom are resulting in an unmanageable case load for individual RCMP Officers.

In the Report on the Review of the 2002/2005 Business Plans for the Department of Justice, Members noted that the Government of Nunavut had announced a $3,500,000 increase to police funding to hire 14 new RCMP Officers for Nunavut. Members also pointed out that given the generally positive financial position of the Government it would be a good time for the Department of Justice, in co-operation with the RCMP, to prepare a submission to the Financial Management Board on the need for an increased police presence in the Northwest Territories.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs was pleased to hear that the Department of Justice is preparing a submission to the Financial Management Board for increased funding to the RCMP for inclusion in next year's Business Plans.

Members would appreciate being kept informed on the status of the submission.

Community Policing

Members of the Standing Committee are interested in being kept apprised on the progress made with the communities of Tsiigehtchic, Sachs Harbour and Wrigley, who have no permanent RCMP presence, in addressing their policing needs.

Members were pleased with the Minister's commitment to also work with the community of Rae Lakes in addressing their request for a policing presence.

Legal Aid

The Standing Committee on Social Programs was pleased to hear that it is possible for other agencies, in communities without Courtworkers, to take applications for Legal Aid and forward them on to the Legal Services Board.

This has not been communicated effectively to the community level.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs supports 3rd parties taking applications for Legal Aid in those communities that do not have a resident Courtworker. It will be necessary for the Legal Service Board to provide training and support to the 3rd parties in processing the applications.

Committee Members noted the Department of Justice would not commit to reform the Legal Aid system in the Northwest Territories in advance of the completion of a Federal research project on Legal Aid in Canada. The Standing Committee on Social Programs is concerned that the Department of Justice is placing too great an emphasis on the results of the Federal Study. It is pointed out that a study, commissioned by the Federal Government, may conclude that the Federal Government is adequately funding Legal Aid in Canada.

Members would still encourage the Department of Justice to look for innovative and cost-effective ways of delivering Legal Aid to NWT Residents in advance of release of the Federal Study expected early in 2003.

Finally, it was also noted that the some regions might not be represented by on the Legal Services Board. The Committee was pleased that the Minister agreed to examine the issue of representation on the Legal Services Board.

Registries

From a quick survey of other Canadian jurisdictions, Committee Members noted that the majority had either instituted on-line registries or were in a transition phase. The Northwest Territories has automated the Personal Property Register. However, it should be noted that the Northwest Territories Personal Property Register is "piggy-backed" onto the Maritime's shared system. In order to access the information, residents must either pay to subscribe to the service or attend the Courthouse in Yellowknife to use the access terminal. This is of little benefit to the average resident of the Northwest Territories, living outside of Yellowknife.

From discussions with the Minister and his officials it is apparent that the Department is moving towards automating many of the registry functions. It is possible for securities information to be filed electronically. Land Titles are in the process of being scanned.

The Department has pointed out that the costs associated with preparing and putting registry information on the Internet are prohibitive. Members understand this and note that other jurisdictions have picked a date whereby afterwards all information is available electronically. Information collected by the Registries prior to that date would still be available by hard copy.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs strongly encourages the Department of Justice to continue reform of the registry function.

Department of Health and Social Services

Introduction

The Standing Committee on Social Programs met with the Minister and his officials on January 22, 2002 to discuss the 2002/2003 Main Estimates for the Department of Health and Social Services.

Since the review of the Business Plans, Members noted a reduction of $49,000 related to funding for Boards for Collective Agreements; an increase of $189,000 in the Amortization Estimate; a new initiative for $500,000 related to the development of a Legislative Action Plan and a transfer of $50,000 to the Department of Public Works and Services for funding of Office Space, under Operations Expense.

Members noted that there were no changes to the Capital Acquisition Plan since the Review of the Business Plans for the Department of Health and Social Services.

A full and frank discussion on the future of the Health and Social Services system was held between the Minister and the Members of the Committee. It should be noted that the Action Plan for the Department of Health and Social Services has not been incorporated into these Main Estimates. Consequently, the Minister has admitted, and the Members of the Committee fully expect, that there will be Supplementary Appropriations relating to the implementation of the Action Plan.

The Standing Committee tried to keep its comments confined to the actual Main Estimates, but as the future of Health and Social Services is dependent on the content of the Action Plan overlap has occurred. A report outlining the concerns of Committee with the Action Plan has been forwarded under separate cover.

Telehealth

Members of the Standing Committee are disappointed that there were no funds in the Capital Acquisition Plan to expand the Telehealth Programs into other communities in the 2002/2003 fiscal year. Members could get no sense of the Department's enthusiasm for Telehealth in the discussions with the Minister and his officials.

The Standing Committee is concerned that the Department could not justify the expansion of the Telehealth Program over other seemingly less important capital projects. Members believe that if an established program like Telehealth cannot survive the capital priority setting exercise the system for allocating capital funding is fundamentally flawed.

Members believe that Telehealth provides an opportunity for faster diagnosis and treatment that lowers chronic care costs in the long run. It is noted that the Department has budgeted $200,000 under Operations Expense for systems enhancements to the existing Telehealth Program. Members hope that the changes brought about by the implementation of the Action Plan will provide the Department with an opportunity to refocus and expand the program in subsequent years.

Information Technology Plan (IT Plan)

The Standing Committee on Social Programs noted that the success of the Action Plan is dependent on flow of information between the Health and Social Services Authorities and the Department.

Members of the Standing Committee have commented in previous Reports to the Assembly that it is imperative for the fiscal reporting relationship between the Authorities and the Department to be standardised and that there be a common software platform used by both parties. The Committee has also identified a need to standardise Human Resource systems and reporting mechanisms.

Committee Members were pleased to see that the Minister's Action Plan provides for the standardisation of the Human Resource and Financial functions of the Health Authorities and the Department of Health and Social Services. Members are, however, concerned given the situation with Telehealth not surviving the capital allocation exercise, that the same fate may happen to the IT Plan. This is not acceptable. If the Action Plan is to have any chance of changing the health and social services system for the better there must be clear and effective communication between the Health and Social Service Authorities and the Department. Part of that clear and effective communication will involve upgrading software and computer hardware platforms.

In his opening remarks to the Committee, the Minister advised that the comprehensive cost of implementing the Action Plan was not factored into this Main Estimate and that the Committee could expect to see requests for supplementary funding. It is hoped that the capital requirements for the IT component of the Action Plan are included in a supplementary request.

Edmonton Nurses

The Standing Committee on Social Services has some concerns about the Nurses in Edmonton that provide support and make health decisions on behalf of northerners. The major concern is that these Nurses are employees of the Capital Health Authority and that their first loyalty is to that organisation.

Members are not concerned about the quality of care provided or recommended by the Nurses. Rather they are concerned that medical decisions may be made without regard to cost to the Department of Health and Social Services. One example would be a Nurse recommending a course of medical treatment in Edmonton without realising that this same course of treatment could be readily delivered at Stanton with a little planning.

It is understood that the contract with the Capital Health Authority is under re-negotiation. Members believe that it is an appropriate time to do a cost/benefit analysis of hiring our own Nurses to deliver services to Northerners in Edmonton.

Recommendation

The Standing Committee on Social Programs recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services examine the costs and benefits of hiring our own Nurses to deliver the program that are presently provided by Nurses employed by the Capital Health Authority.

Board Deficits

The Standing Committee on Social Programmes notes that the Minister will be coming forward with a supplementary appropriation to implement a 60/40 split with the Health Authorities on deficit reduction. This still means that each of the Health Authorities is responsible for 40% of their accumulated deficits with the exception of the Lutsel k'e and Deninoo Boards who will have any deficits wiped prior to amalgamation with another health Authority. Members also noted that the Minister stated that the new Sahtu Health Authority's share of the Inuvik Regional Health Authority's deficit would be the subject of negotiation. Members found it perplexing that the Department would contemplate forming a new Health Authority in a deficit position.

The Minister's Action Plan calls for clarifying roles and responsibilities between the Department and the Health Authorities by February 2003. The Action Plan also calls for the design and implementation of a revised funding model for the Health Authorities by April of 2004.

Members of the Committee point out that the Action Plan makes it clear that accountability and fiscal frameworks for the Health Authorities are under development. There appears to be nothing to prevent the Health Authorities, under the current frameworks, from running up a further deficit prior to the implementation of accountability frameworks or funding formulas called for in the Action Plan.

The Minister asserts that the 60/40 split on the deficits of the Health Authorities coupled with the implementation of the Action Plan will effectively wipe the slate clean for each of the Health Authorities and provide them with a fresh start. The Minister also implied that the Health Authorities would be responsible for their own deficits less agreed forced growth increases.

Members are concerned that some Health Authorities, either before or after the implementation of the Action Plan, may initiate programs that put the Authority into a deficit position. The point is ultimately the Department of Health and Social Services are responsible for the deficit that any of the Health Authorities accumulate. The Government and the Department cannot allow any Health Authority to cut essential services to the public to deal with a deficit financial position.

The Standing Committee looks forward to receiving copies of each of the Health Authorities Deficit Recovery Plans incorporating the 60/40 split on accumulated deficit.

Medical Travel

The Standing Committee on Social Programmes has commented on their concerns about the application of the Department's Medical Travel Policy in past Reports to this Assembly.

Many of the complaints that MLA's get from their constituents are about the uneven application of the Medical Travel Policy by the individual Health Authorities. As well, because many extended families have relatives in different Health Authorities they talk about the differences of application for each Authority. The lack of perceived consistency breeds resentment between communities and families.

Members of the Committee look forward to the results of the review of the Extended Health Benefits that is currently underway. There is hope, that as a result of this study, a clear, concise and evenly applied policy on Medical Travel can be developed and communicated to the residents of the Northwest Territories.

Child Protection Workers

Members note that 10 new Child Protection Workers are budgeted for in this Main Estimate. These workers are being hired as a result of recommendations contained in the Child Protection League of Canada's Report on Child Welfare in the Northwest Territories from a couple of years ago.

At the time of the review of the Main Estimates at the Committee level the Department of Health and Social Services had not yet determined which communities would be receiving child protection workers. Members look forward to the promised information on where these workers will be posted and the rationalisation for the Department's decision.

Child Advocate

During the review of the Main Estimates, Members noted that no mention was made of funding or creating a Child Advocate position within the Department of Health and Social Services. Upon questioning of the Minister it was revealed that the Department is expecting to complete a study on such a position by the end of fiscal year 2001/2002.

Members support the creation of a Child Advocate position and look forward to reviewing the results of the Department's study early in the next fiscal year.

Southern Placements and Long-term Care

Members are still concerned with the number of residents placed in southern institutions. It was noted in the Report on the Review of the 2002/2005 Business Plans that it was important for the Department to continue to examine the costs of southern placements versus the economics of providing the service in the Northwest Territories. In our discussions with the Minister he admitted that southern placements was one area experiencing forced growth and that he will be asking for a supplementary appropriation to deal with the funding shortfall.

The Standing Committee would ask that the Department be ever vigilant in repatriating northerners from southern institutions. The Members look forward to reviewing the Department's Continuing Care Strategy once it is finalised.

Increase in the Number of Children in Foster Care

The Minister informed the Committee that he would be coming forward with a Supplementary Appropriation to deal with an increase in the number of children in Foster Care. Members, along with the Minister, are concerned that the Department cannot readily identify the reason for the significant increase in the number of children in Foster Care.

The Minister agreed with the Committee that we had to establish the reason for the increase in the number of children going into Foster Care and develop a response to the strain on the system. The Department is conducting a review of the cases and will be providing the Committee with their finding once the analysis is completed.

Members were also concerned that there were disparities in the rates paid to Foster Care Parents between the different communities. This is a concern that has been brought to MLA's by constituents. The Department has agreed to do a better job in communicating the rationalisation for the differences in Foster Care Payments to Foster Parents.

Prevention and Promotion

Members noted that Prevention and Promotion is highlighted in the Department of Health and Social Service's Vision and in Towards a Better Tomorrow. Members could not find Prevention and Promotion programs highlighted in the Main Estimates or in the Business Plans.

The Department needs to do a better job in communicating the consequences of destructive behaviour to northerners. People need to have an understanding of the costs of their behaviour on the Health and Social Services system in the Northwest Territories.

Access to Healthcare in the Communities

In those communities without a Hospital access to a Healthcare professional is restricted to office hours unless it is an emergency. If you have a medical problem you go to the clinic and wait to see the nurse. If you have not been seen by closing time you are asked to go home and come in tomorrow. The next day the same process could repeat itself.

The wait to see the Nurses is also complicated by the number of programs, such as well baby and prenatal clinics that are run during regular clinic hours. While the Nurses run these important programs no one is seen in the clinic which further compounds any patient backlog.

One Member had asked his Health Authority whether the clinic could be open in the evening. He stated that discussions with the staff of the Nursing Station had indicated that there were no objections to such a system. The Health Authority would not consider opening in the evening citing Union Agreements prevented them from implementing such a schedule.

Members realize that it is not practical to staff Nursing Stations and Health Centres on a 24-hour basis. However, evening clinic hours should be considered to improve access to the healthcare system in the smaller communities. If it is true that Union Agreements do not allow such arrangements, this should be discussed during the current contract negotiations

Board (Health Authorities) Support

If the Action Plan is to be successful it will be necessary to dramatically enhance the Board Support function at the Department level.

Members expect to see a Supplementary Appropriation in the near future related to increases required to provide the proper support to the new Health Authorities.

Administration Costs for the Health Authorities

It appears to Members of the Committee that the administration costs for the Health and Social Services Authorities are significantly higher than those incurred by the District Education Authorities.

This could be a false impression because it is not clear whether Health and Social Services Authorities consider the same items as administration costs as the Education Authorities. Members are extremely interested in comparing administration costs between the two entities and in determining the reasons for any major differences.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs believes that there should be a standardisation of what constitutes administration costs at the Authority level between the Department of Health and Social Services and the Department of Education, Culture and Employment.

Recommendation

The Standing Committee on Social Programs recommends that the Department of Health and Social Services and the Department of Education, Culture and Employment work together to standardise, as much as possible, the allocating and reporting of administration cost at the Authority level.

Family Violence Prevention Act

Members of the Standing Committee on Social Programmes still see the development and passage of Family Violence Prevention Legislation as a major objective for this Assembly.

The Minister of Health and Social Services is strongly encouraged to press the Department of Justice to develop the necessary legislation.

Health Funding to the Dene Nation

Members noted that under Grants and Contributions for Community Health Programs there is a heading entitled Health Awareness, Activities and Education. This money is supposedly for organizations and local governments to promote increased understanding of health awareness, health related activities and education.

In actual fact, the $143,000 listed is a grant made to the Dene Nation and there is no other money available to organizations and local governments for health awareness. This grant followed the transfer of health programs from the Federal Government in 1988.

The Minister has provided the Committee with information on the programs and services that the Dene Nation uses the $143,000 for.

In the future, Members would like to see this grant properly identified as going to the Dene Nation.